

# Who, or what, is Circe?

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For Ben Folit-Weinberg, Circe is one of the most exciting characters in the *Odyssey* and, perhaps, even in all of Homer. Here he explains what makes her uniquely fascinating.

## Meeting Circe

When Circe makes her appearance in the *Apologoi* – the fabulous tales Odysseus tells the Phaeacians in *Odyssey* 9–12 – she is described in a manner that would make any hero, ancient or modern, green with envy. She is the mistress of Aeaea, an island paradise where ‘Dawn has her chambers and dancing-floor, and the sun his risings’. She lives there in wondrous splendour, her stone mansion staffed by the fairest river nymphs who set silver tables with baskets and goblets of gold. There is no end to the meat she serves, no end to the honeyed wine, and in her house no man leaves his bath unanointed with oil or without the comfort of a fleecy cloak. Yet she is, in the words of Homer, ‘a dread goddess’ (δεινὴ θεός), one who can use her remarkable powers for good or bad.

## Helpful guide

Circe isn’t only the glamorous hostess *par excellence*: she is also an unusually knowledgeable guide. Without her instructions, it is difficult to imagine Odysseus and his men navigating two of the mythical map’s most perilous tracks: first to Hades, where ‘no living man has yet been in a black ship’, to consult with the shade of the seer Tiresias, and then, after briefly returning to Aeaea, past a fearsome line-up of monsters and other fatal obstacles: the Sirens, whose song entrances men until they die; the Wandering Rocks, which smash all who pass to smithereens; Scylla, a six-headed monster who eats men by the half-dozen; Charybdis, the giant maelstrom that swallows ships down three times a day; and Thrinacia, where the daughters of the Sun tend their father’s sacred flocks. Not only, then, does Circe treat Odysseus and his men with such lavish hospitality, she also helps them achieve one of the great triumphs an ancient hero could claim – a round-trip to the Underworld – and then, thanks to her instructions, saves their lives many times over as they journey on. It is precisely when Odysseus’ men ignore her

warnings that disaster strikes.

## Dangerous temptress

Yet all through this fantasy courses a sinister undercurrent. When Odysseus’ men first approach her palace, they are encircled by a pack of eerily docile lions and wolves. By the time Odysseus arrives, his men have been added to their number, transformed in body (though not mind) to swine. Circe, it turns out, drugs the food she serves her guests, and charms them with a kind of magic wand, turning men into beasts. Odysseus is saved this fate only thanks to the intervention of the god Hermes, who intercepts him *en route* to Circe’s palace to provide him with the antidote to her charms, a mysterious herb called ‘moly’, ‘a black root with flower like milk’. And the god has further advice for Odysseus: when Circe, with her sweet singing voice, her silky tresses, and slenderest of ankles, invites him into her bed, he must first make her swear an oath not to unman him.

Having been fed all the right lines by Hermes, Odysseus remains immune to metamorphosis and castration, and ultimately gets his men restored back to their proper form; what follows is a year of feasts, a limitless supply of meat, and the wine mixed just so with honey. And it is precisely here that lies another of Circe’s great risks: her island is the one place in the whole of his travels where Odysseus forgets about his *nostos*, his return home. Where his steadfast mind steels him through the seductions of the Lotus-Eaters, the terrors of the Caves of the Cyclops and Scylla, and the joyless pleasures of Calypso’s lair, after a year filled with woman, wine, and song on Aeaea, it is his men who must remind him of Ithaca and the need to return home.

## The ‘character type’

One might object that the question of who or what Circe actually is does not matter when she can so fully master the imagination. Yet it is precisely these arresting

details that make this question so interesting. In fact, the story of a witch or sorceress who lives in the woods and changes men into animals can be found in many folktales; within this context, Circe’s use of a special drug (which in turn has its own special antidote), for example, as well as the presence of a kind of magic wand – the same details one finds in so many versions of this folktale – become more expected than surprising. Seen from the perspective of folklore studies, that is, all the elements that at first seem fabulous and fantastic about Circe suddenly seem typical.

Circe also resembles other figures from ancient myth, including a character from the much older *Epic of Gilgamesh*. In that Mesopotamian epic, too, we find a more-than-mortal female figure, Siduri, who serves as an intermediary between the world of gods and men. Like Circe, she too helps guide a mortal man taking a long sea-voyage to a special and otherwise impenetrable part of the world where he will gain knowledge of life-or-death importance. Like Circe, she lives by the sea at the edge of the earth, and her dwelling-place has close connections with the sun; she, too, like Circe, would detain the mortal voyager indefinitely with the promise of domestic comforts and the pleasure of food and drink.

What should we make of this relationship between the *Odyssey* and other poems or stories in existence at that time? How should we think about their connection to the *Odyssey*? Do they simply indicate that parts of the *Odyssey* are the product of a long and rich tradition of oral poetry? Or should we think that epic poetry in general and the *Odyssey* in particular are voracious, with a predilection for digesting and incorporating as many other stories and genres as possible in their compass? Is the inclusion of folktale elements part of a strategy for defining normal human life on Ithaca, where no trace of the magic and fantasy of Odysseus’ wanderings is to be found? And how active or passive do we think the poet of the *Odyssey* is in relation to these other influences? Where, in short, does tradition end and Circe begin, where does Circe end and tradition begin?

## A typical ‘Homeric woman’?

It is not only, however, that Circe resem-

bles figures from other narratives, be they folktales or other epic myths; what is remarkable is the degree to which Circe resembles other characters in the *Odyssey* itself. The most obvious point of comparison is with Calypso, another mansion-dwelling, loom-working, glossy-haired, slender-ankled goddess who seduces Odysseus and significantly delays his return to Ithaca. But think, too, about Circe in relation to Penelope, Odysseus' faithful and long-suffering wife. Whereas Odysseus spends his days on Calypso's isle pining for Ithaca, he enjoys his time at Circe's table (and in her bed) so much that, for the first and last time in the *Odyssey*, Ithaca and the wife who awaits him there slip from his mind. Something, however, ultimately compels him back to Ithaca from the divine paradise of Aeaea – what is this?

We might also ask this question about Nausicaa, the charming Phaeacian princess encountered by Odysseus in book 6, when he is shipwrecked and sleeping rough. In this sense (and others), Circe and Nausicaa can also be seen as useful points of comparison: what is it about each of them that makes them attractive to Odysseus, and why might it be that he ultimately chooses to return to Penelope rather than stay with one of these two enticing potential partners?

In the sequence of encounters the poet stages between Odysseus and each of these females, mortal and immortal, we learn what it means in the *Odyssey* to be female – and to be a man. Each of the females is fixed to her own place (a location and a household), which the man visits during his travels; she presides over its resources, material and social, which she can offer to the newly arrived man if she wishes – but then he must stay with her and end his journey. The goddesses enchant, with voice or sex or drug, an ambiguous power that always spells danger but (or because it) brings pleasure. The women exercise their power through smarts and their status in human society (the man who enters her bed will be king), and it is the woman's place in the mesh of human relations that, in the *Odyssey*, ultimately proves decisive: where the goddesses Circe and Calypso are cut off from society, divine and mortal alike, Penelope, faithful as she is crafty, ensures Odysseus a connection to the future (through the son she bears him, Telemachus) and guards his past, his identity. Who would Odysseus be if he turned up on Ithaca and found a usurper in his place beside her? Agamemnon has an answer from Hades.

### What makes Circe unique?

In the same way that Circe can be likened to other women in Homer, so she begs

comparison with many other characters in the *Odyssey*, especially the *Apologoi*. In fact, it is perhaps Circe's most striking quality that she stands at the hub of such a rich and complex network of relationships radiating throughout the entirety of the *Odyssey* – just as her episode is located at the very centre of the *Apologoi*, occupying much of book 12 of 24, which is itself at the center of the *Odyssey*. But in one important respect Circe is unique. Just as it is only in her company that Odysseus forgets Ithaca, so it is only thanks to her great knowledge and good cheer that he is finally able to get directions back to his wife, son, house, and kingdom, to turn what had previously been blind wandering into a successful *nostos*, a focused (if tormented) return. Without Circe, that is, one would always remember the destination but might never make it there; with her, even if one may at times forget what one was looking for, sooner or later she will help you find a way back home: and in this, perhaps we readers of the *Odyssey* are no different from Odysseus.

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